

Planned Parenthood offers texts to teens seeking advice about sex

By Anthony Cotton The Denver Post The Denver Post

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A group of teenagers is hanging out when the talk turns to sex. Questions are raised, but the answers within the assemblage range from somewhat plausible to downright laughable.

Where do they go for the truth?

Like everything else "teen" these days, it could be their cellphones. At least that's the hope of Planned Parenthood, which on Wednesday launched a text-messaging program called In Case You're Curious, or ICYC.

"We always encourage youth to have conversations with their parents, but we also recognize that not everyone has that ability," said Alison Macklin, director of community education for Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains. "We're not trying to take the place of those conversations, of them providing firsthand knowledge, but rather we're providing a way to help answer questions."

An offshoot of the Denver Teen Pregnancy Prevention Partnership, which began in Denver Public Schools in 2007, ICYC fell under the auspices of Planned Parenthood last year.

Since Planned Parenthood took over, about 500 messages have been received. Macklin said the hope is to at least double that total over the next year.

In the program, teens text their questions, which are parsed by Planned Parenthood staff. The responses — limited to 160 characters — are sent within 24 hours.

While the limited responses often direct the questioner to seek further advice from health and medical professionals, Macklin said they can be of immediate assistance on some topics.

"Our goal is to arm youth with medically accurate, age-appropriate information about what might be going on with their bodies," she said. "We'd rather have them have access to that information than wondering or relying on common myths, like 'It's better to use two condoms rather than one,' when the reality is that doing so will actually increase the risk for an unplanned pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease."

In announcing the program, Planned Parenthood cited numbers from the Pew Research Center indicating that 75 percent of teenagers owned cellphones in 2010; of that number, 87 percent at least occasionally sent texts. Also, according to Pew, girls ages 14-17 "typically" send more than 100 texts a day.

Citing numbers from Colorado Youth Matter, Planned Parenthood said that from 2007 to 2009, there were on average 3,240 births among females ages 15-19 in the seven-county Denver metro area each year. In addition, 40 percent of Colorado high school students reported having had sex in their lifetime.

"We're excited to give this resource to the community," Macklin said. "With your youth texting more and more, it's an opportunity for them to get answers and clarity in a format that's familiar to them as well as getting access at any time."

ICYC is slated to run for a year. While the program is limited to Denver, Macklin said expansion to other locations has been discussed, with the topic likely to be revisited in 2012.

However, not everyone was onboard with the new initiative.

"We're aware of it," said Keith Mason, president of Denver-based Personhood USA, which last month filed new language for a proposed constitutional amendment to end abortions in Colorado. "It's just another extension of their abortion-marketing plan. Just like restaurants use texts to give out coupons, this is their way of driving young people to Planned Parenthood, the largest abortion chain in America."

Anthony Cotton: 303-954-1292 or acotton@denverpost.com